

## ***Small Churches—A Divine Design***

First-century Christians gathered almost exclusively in private homes. God used these house churches to turn the Roman world upside down. Could He use small congregations today as strategically as He did early house churches? *Small churches that do the types of things first-century house churches did, in the love and power of the Holy Spirit, have great potential to advance God's kingdom.* Small and Spirit-filled is part of a divine design.

### **Profit**

Since everything in the New Testament was written to churches that met in the private homes of its members, the relationship dynamics it describes work best in smaller settings. Smaller settings foster the intimacy, unity, love and accountability that characterized the early church. The relationships described in the New Testament work best in situations where everyone knows each other. A loving, family-like atmosphere is more easily developed. The many “one another” exhortations of Scripture can be more realistically lived out. Church discipline takes on genuine significance. Disciple making is personal and natural. Participatory worship fits smaller settings better and the things shared are much more meaningful. Celebrating the Lord's Supper as an actual family meal is more natural in a smaller setting. Achieving congregational consensus is easier when everyone knows everyone else and open lines of communication genuinely exist with one another. Involvement with a smaller church can be a wonderful blessing with strategic, divinely designed advantages.

### **Proof**

Scripture indicates the early church met in the private homes of its more affluent members. Philemon, wealthy enough to own a slave, hosted a church in his home (Phlm 2b). Church hostess Lydia was a prosperous businesswoman who sold expensive purple fabric and could afford servants (Ac 16:14). A church met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla, a couple employed in the evidently lucrative first-century trade of tent-making (Ac 18:1-3). Gaius, a man with the means to generously support missionaries (3Jn 1-5), had a home big enough to host the sizable Corinthian congregation (Ro 16:23). According to Yale University archaeologists, “The first Christian congregations worshipped in private houses, meeting at the homes of wealthier members on a rotating basis . . . Worship was generally conducted in the atrium, or central courtyard of the house.”

Less well known is the fact the early church continued this practice of home meetings for hundreds of years after the New Testament was completed. Graydon Snyder of Chicago Theological Seminary observed that “the New Testament Church began as a small group house church (Col. 4:15), and it remained so until the middle or end of the third century. There are no evidences of larger places of meeting before 300.” Again quoting Snyder, “there is no literary evidence nor archaeological indication that any such home was converted into an extant church building. Nor is there any extant church that certainly was built prior to Constantine.”

The real issue is not where a church meets but how it can best do what God requires of it. Size plays an important role in this. Having too many people in attendance can serve to defeat the purposes for holding a church meeting in the first place. Large crowds are great for special praise concerts, seminars, or evangelism but the weekly church gathering is to be about something more: mutual edification, accountability, encouraging one another, the fellowship of the Holy Meal, strengthening relationships, building consensus, etc. In keeping with the New Testament example, the ideal size for a congregation might be the same number of people that would fit into a first-century Roman villa.

### **Professors**

Reformed scholar William Hendriksen said, “since in the first and second centuries church buildings in the sense in which we think of them today were not yet in existence, families would hold services in their own homes.” (By services, Hendriksen did not mean personal family devotions, but church services in a private home).

According to Anglican priest and evangelist David Watson, “For the first two centuries, the church met in small groups in the homes of its members, apart from special gatherings in public lecture halls or market places, where people could come together in much larger numbers. Significantly these two centuries mark the most powerful and vigorous advance of the church, which perhaps has never seen been equaled.”

Martin Selman of Spurgeon’s College in London wrote, “The theme of the ‘household of God’ undoubtedly owed much to the function of the house in early Christianity as a place of meeting and fellowship (e.g. 2 Tim. 4:19; Phm. 2; 2 Jn. 10).”

According to W.H. Griffith Thomas, co-founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, “For two or three centuries Christians met in private houses . . . There seems little doubt that these informal gatherings of small groups of believers had great influence in preserving the simplicity and purity of early Christianity.”

Seminary professor Ronald Sider, in *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, wrote, “The early church was able to defy the decadent values of Roman civilization precisely because it experienced the reality of Christian fellowship in a mighty way . . . Christian fellowship meant unconditional availability to and unlimited liability for the other sisters and brothers—emotionally, financially and spiritually. When one member suffered, they all suffered. When one rejoiced, they all rejoiced (1 Cor. 12:26). When a person or church experienced economic trouble, the others shared without reservation. And when a brother or sister fell into sin, the others gently restored the straying person (Mt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Gal. 6:1-3). The sisters and brothers were available to each other, liable for each other and accountable to each other. The early church, of course, did not always fully live out the New Testament vision of the body of Christ. There were tragic lapses. But the network of tiny house churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire did experience their oneness in Christ so vividly that they were able to defy and eventually conquer a powerful, pagan civilization. The overwhelming majority of churches today, however, do not provide the context in which brothers and sisters can encourage, admonish and disciple each other. We desperately need new settings and structures for watching over one another in love.”

## **Pattern**

What are we to do with the fact that the early church met mostly in homes? The most common explanation for the existence of early house churches was the pressure of persecution, similar to the situation existing today in China or Iran. Yet even in the absence of persecution, might the apostles have intended to lay down a purposeful pattern of smaller congregations? It is a design axiom that form follows function. Meeting in a smaller setting would have a practical effect on one’s church life. The apostles’ belief concerning the function of the church was naturally expressed in the form the church took on in the first century. Some of the distinct practices of those early small churches are worth considering:

- 1. The Church as Family:** An overarching significance of the New Testament church lies in its theology of community. The church was depicted by apostolic writers in terms which describe a family. Believers are children of God (1Jn 3:1) who have been born into his family (Jn 1:12-13). God’s people are thus seen as part of God’s household (Ep 2:19, Ga 6:10). They are called brothers and sisters (Phm 2, Ro 16:2). Consequently, Christians are to relate to each other as members of a family (1Ti 5:1-2; Ro 16:13). Out of the theological truth that God’s children are family arises many church practice issues, such as the size of a congregation that best facilitates our functioning as God’s family. According to Fuller seminary professor Robert Banks, “Even the meetings of the ‘whole church’ were small enough for a relatively intimate relationship to develop between the members.”
- 2. One Another Ministry:** The Scriptures are full of “one another” commands. The Church should be associated with mutual encouragement, accountability, relationships, community and maintaining church discipline. These ideals are best accomplished in smaller congregations where people know and love each other. A large auditorium of people, most of

congregations where people know and love each other. A large congregation of people, most of whom are relative strangers to each other, will not easily achieve these goals. Nominal Christianity is harbored as it becomes easy to get lost in the crowd. Smaller churches can best foster the simplicity, vitality, intimacy and purity that God desires for His Church.

- 3. Participatory Worship:** Early church meetings were clearly participatory. As public speaking is a great fear, participatory meetings are best suited to smaller gatherings composed of people who all know each other and are true friends. After church meetings in Roman atriums were replaced by meetings in much larger basilicas, participatory worship was replaced by scripted, stage performance type services. The practical reality of the priesthood of the believer was lost until the Reformation.
- 4. The Holy Meal:** The Lord's Supper was originally celebrated weekly as a full, fellowship meal (the *Agapé* Feast). Each local church is to be like a family; one of the most common things families do is eat together. The larger the congregation, the less family-like and the more impersonal the Lord's Supper as a true meal becomes. Early church meetings centered on the Lord's Table were tremendous times of fellowship, community, and encouragement. Rather than in a funeral-like atmosphere, the Lord's Supper was reverently celebrated in anticipation of the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb.
- 5. Congregational Consensus:** The New Testament church had a plurality of clearly identified leaders (elders, pastors, overseers), yet these leaders led more by example and persuasion than by command. Building consensus of the whole congregation was important in decision making. Achieving consensus is possible in a church where everyone knows each other, loves each other, bears with one another, is patient with one another and is committed to each other. An informal, smaller setting is an effective place for the building of consensus. However, the larger the fellowship, the more difficult it becomes to maintain relationships and lines of communication. Further, in a large congregation, the pastor necessarily functions more like the CEO of a corporation or, worse yet, like a king over his own kingdom. The pastors become inaccessible. Intimacy is lost.
- 6. Multiplication:** Small churches have great potential for growth through multiplication. New churches grow faster than larger ones. New leaders should be continually trained from within to go out and start new works. We need to think small in a really big way! Rather than growing a single church bigger and bigger, consider sending off clusters of people to start new small churches. Commit to being a small church that starts new small churches that start other small churches.
- 7. Resource Allocation:** Charles Price, Director of Missions for the San Antonio Baptist Association, lamented that the typical cost to start a new church in North America is an astounding two million dollars. Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando estimated, "Our two church plants are going to cost us about \$2,450,000 over a three-year period." In light of these staggering figures, as your small church starts new small churches, be creative in finding places to meet that are cost efficient. Look into renting an apartment clubhouse, dance academy, storefront, school cafeteria or community center. Kingdom minded older congregations may be willing to let you use their building after their services are over. Don't rule out the possibility of meeting in someone's home—under the right circumstances it can still be a viable option.

## Proportions

Just how many people were involved in an early house church? As New Testament churches met almost exclusively in private homes, the typical congregation of the apostolic era was relatively small. There were no more people than would fit into a wealthy person's home (in the atrium, courtyard, or large living area). Though house churches were at the opposite end of the spectrum from modern mega-churches, it is important to avoid the mistake of thinking *too* small. The size should be just right; not too big and not too small (neither mega nor micro).

The Matthew 18 restoration process detailed by Jesus clearly assumes more than just "us four and no more." There was a single house church meeting in Corinth; counting the various people using their spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14 adds up to a healthy number of believers. Early house churches were able to support qualified widows and elders, which would have required more than just a handful of believers (1Ti 5:3-16). Having a plurality of elders in a church is unlikely in too small a setting (Acts 14:23). Early churches meeting in Roman villas

typically consisted of scores of people, perhaps over a hundred, but not hundreds and certainly not thousands.

As already seen, Scripture indicates the early church met in the homes of its wealthier members. This was probably because of the large size of the home and the ability of the host to provide much of the food for the love feast. The challenge in worshiping in a home today lies in the fact that modern homes are often far different from first-century Roman villas.

Roman villas doubled as centers for commerce. They were big, semipublic houses. The two rooms facing the street were often businesses. A hallway between them led into the home's atrium. At the far end of the atrium was the business office. It was not unusual for strangers to be in and out of a home. Further, there were typically multiple generations of family under the same roof. In addition, the household employed servants and their families.

There were large areas in which the church could gather, such as the atrium. Walls between adjoining rooms off the atrium could be removed to create a big open area. Beyond the business office was an even larger semi-covered and completely enclosed courtyard. Spacious living rooms were often built off the courtyard. Enough believers were able to gather in the villas to make disciples, manifest a variety of spiritual gifts, have multiple people with the same gift, give to widows and orphans, have a plurality of elders and financially support qualified pastor-teachers (who were, thus, freed to be devoted to making disciples, in-depth teaching and leadership). They also probably had more of an Asian mindset to crowding than we do in the West; there may have been 150 people in an early house church.

The meeting room of the Lullingstone Villa house church in Kent, England (built during the Roman occupation) measured approximately 15' x 21'. By modern standards this would seat about 50 people. An examination of floor plans in Pompeii shows typical atriums measuring 20' x 28'. This would seat between 60 and 80 people.

The *ESV Study Bible* notes that early Christian churches "met in homes . . . There is extensive archaeological evidence from many cites showing that some homes were structurally modified to hold such churches." One such modified home known to host a church was found in Dura-Europos, Syria. It could, according to the archaeologists who excavated it, seat 65 to 70 people. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor measured six homes in Pompeii and Ephesus and found the average atrium size to be 797 square feet. This would seat around 100 people. Acts records 120 believers assembled in the upper room of a house.

As first-century congregations grew, they did not erect bigger and bigger buildings. Instead, they multiplied, constantly training leaders and sending out groups to start new fellowships. Rather than growing your one congregation bigger and bigger, make it your goal to start new small churches that start other small churches. Small churches align very much in size with apostolic churches that met in Roman villas.

## **Perspective**

There are both advantage and disadvantages to small churches. In the previous chapters, small churches were encouraged to play to their relational strengths by incorporating some of the practices of first-century house churches. In the West, the perceived disadvantages of small churches are mostly cultural. The Barna Group's study on why small churches don't grow revealed that people with children are often looking for a church that offers an impressive children's ministry, which in turn requires the funding for first-class facilities and to hire competent personnel, something smaller churches have financial difficulty doing. How can this be overcome?

Many thriving small churches focus on reaching homeschool families. Those who have pulled their children out of both government and Christian schools are often not interested in their children being involved with Sunday school or youth groups. Impressive children's ministries mean little to them. One pastor of a church composed of homeschool families was asked if his church had a youth pastor; he replied it had not one but twenty youth pastors—each family's father.

A homeschool family's thinking is often based on such truths as, "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child" and "the companion of fools will suffer harm." Because children are foolish, putting them all together in one class may be a recipe for spiritual and social disaster. The real influence in the room is not the teacher but peer pressure. Worst yet, many parents drop their children off at a church youth program as sort of a reform school, hoping for a miracle. The

problem with this is the corrupting influence children have on each other: “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals.’” It is also felt that putting children in Sunday School or a youth group takes the pressure off the parents to fulfill their God-given roles of training their own children.

Barna’s study found that singles under 35 were more open to attending small churches. This is good. However what happens when they marry and have children? Apart from homeschoolers, expect an exodus to a larger church with a first-rate children’s program. What can be done? First, thank God for the years you had to make disciples of these Millennials before they moved on. Second, continue doing things to bring in new singles under 35. Some young couples who leave a small church upon having children will return after their children are grown. Someone needs to minister to singles and empty nesters, and small churches are in an excellent position to do so.

What constitutes a successful ministry anyway? How many people attend a church? How fast it grows? How big the budget is? Jesus went from 5000 down to 12 in one sermon. Was Jesus’ ministry a failure? *Of course not.* Noah faithfully preached to his generation, yet only a handful were saved. How successful was Isaiah’s ministry to a dull, spiritually blind people? He was successful because he was faithful to what God wanted him to do. Hence, a successful small church leader is one who is faithful to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” It does not matter if your church never gets larger as long as one is faithful in God’s household. The legacy of a faithful small church will outlast a larger, entertainment-oriented congregation. Let us strive to faithfully follow the example of Christ and the Apostles in our churches and ministries today.

If you lead your small church to adopt early church practice, it will be a blessing to people. They will grow spiritually. It will likely create a contagious excitement that will cause numerical growth as well. We long to see the Lord’s churches full if such growth represents people being reached with the Gospel and made into disciples. The temptation is to enjoy this growth, allowing the original church to get far larger than a typical church of the apostolic era. Instead of getting bigger and bigger, purpose to maintain the New Testament example of Roman-villa-sized churches. Build reproduction into the DNA of the church. Continually teach the men to be the leaders in their homes and the church. Train up new leaders from within. Once leadership is in place, send out a sizable portion of the original church to start new a small church.

Click [here](#) for practical considerations for small churches.

*Audio, video and a teacher’s discussion guide on small church theology are also on our web site.*

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What evidence is there that persecution was not the only reason the early church met in homes?
2. Some argue that Roman villa sized churches were characteristic of the church in its infancy, but not in its maturity. It was right and natural, they argue, for each church to grow beyond the confines of a home, building larger and larger places to meet. How do you feel about this?
3. Are we to believe that having smaller congregations was a purely incidental aspect of the blueprint for church life or was it purposeful? Why?
4. Why might the apostles have laid down a purposeful pattern of small churches?
5. What practical advantages and disadvantages would meeting in a home have?
6. What psychological impact might the size of a church meeting have on the actual meeting and people themselves?
7. How would the number of people involved impact a church’s ability to have a participatory meeting or to achieve congregational consensus?
8. What advantages for growth and reproduction might house churches have over fellowships that have to build church houses?
9. What should be done in a situation where a home is simply too small to host a church meeting?
10. How did New Testament churches grow numerically yet still meet in private homes?

